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The Myal Principle: Erna Brodber's Afro Caribbean Literary/Philosophical Discourse

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This paper focuses on Brodber's 1988 novel, *Myal*, and examines the ways in which the author's literary work participates in the discourse of Afro-Caribbean philosophy by advancing an alternative worldview outside the logic of strictly Westernist theoretical models that are sometimes privileged in the still-emerging field of academic Afro-Caribbean philosophy.¹ As its title suggests, the novel invokes the Afro-Caribbean syncretic religion, Myal, and, I argue, presents the re-articulation of an African/Afro-Caribbean cosmogony and worldview, with spirituality as its epicenter, which while the subject of spirituality has received some attention within Afro-Caribbean philosophical thought, it has seemingly occupied a subordinate discursive space.

Brodber's work implicitly questions the efficacy of exclusive employment of Western schools of thought, and excavates autochthonous Afro-Caribbean knowledge systems, wisdom traditions, and derived creolized forms, that unsettle homogenizing Western epistemological regimes to expand theoretical possibilities not only for reading Afro-Caribbean culture and for redefining personhood within a postcolonial frame, but also for construing postmodernity in

¹ Paget Henry asserts in *Caliban's Reasoning* (2000) that Caribbean philosophy "must creolize itself by breaking its misidentifications with European and African philosophies and allowing them to mix within the framework of more organic relations with local realities" (2000, 89).

ways that recognize “the new subjects of history,”² among other postmodern subjectivities, and re-cognize humanity, more broadly. I read Brodber’s fiction as participating in and critiquing both postcolonial and postmodern discourses on human subjectivity and illuminating a productive synthesis of theoretical approaches to advance a literary representation of the process by which a more equitable and “ethical humanism”³ within a new order of consciousness might be achieved.

In *The Caribbean Postcolonial* (2004) Shalini Puri, posits that while there are variances in the “historical stresses” that produced postcolonialism and postmodernism, both engage in a critique of modernity and “investigate alternative forms of agency” (2004, 140). The critique in each instance, while constructed around the interrogation of the failed project of modernity and the Enlightenment,⁴ is staged from different historical trajectories and different geo-political, socio-cultural locations. In the case of the *Caribbean* postcolonial, the critique focuses on particular subjectivities that continue to be impacted by economic and cultural domination and

² Chela Sandoval, in *Methodology of the Oppressed* (2000), critiques Fredric Jameson’s Postmodernist manifesto, *Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), asserting that if this manifesto is to engender a transformative politics and inspire alternative forms of globalization, it must necessarily recognize subjectivities that have “ascended out of colonization” and exist outside of the European and North American sites to which he makes specific reference and anchors his discussion (2000, 15-16).

³ I borrow the term, “ethical humanism” from Drucilla Cornel and Kenneth Panfilio who, in *Symbolic Forms for a New Humanity* (2010), discuss the imperative of acknowledging the legitimacy and legacy of Afro-Caribbean philosophy and of black philosophies of existence more generally (2010, 122) if there is to be a transformative revolution of thought and consciousness that brings about the repair of the “fractured ethical world” (2010, 95).

⁴ In “Modernity – An Incomplete Project,” Jürgen Habermas describes the project of modernity formulated by 18th century philosophers of the Enlightenment whose agenda entailed bringing into being the objectivity of scientific knowledge, the actualization of universal morality and law, and aesthetic independence (2010, 45) toward the aim of perfecting human society.

control by imperialist imperatives; consequently, these subjectivities still struggle to come into full visibility.

Postmodernist Marxist critique sees modernity's failure as having produced the first world citizen-subject who is, according to Chela Sandoval, "caught in a strange, new, tragic anti-narrative" for whom escape "requires fresh forms of perceiving and acting" (2004, 18), fresh ways of conceiving the self and the world. The capitalist economic world system⁵ has inevitably locked the consumer-subject into the relentless fragmentation and abstraction of human experience within commoditized culture, at a rate that reflects what Paget Henry describes as the "corrosive effects of ... technology and commodity production on the norms, ideals, and interactive practices that are necessary to sustain communities" ("Commodification", 2000, 186). Commodity discourse regarding the capitalist mode of production reflects the systemic logic of "exchange values" and "use values" such that "the primary signifier of a use-value" is the price assigned the object (2000, 187).

Terms like "exchange value" and of "use value" are integral to Sylvia Wynter's concept of *homo economicus*, which illuminates how the economic world system has produced a situation in which the human subject, *homo economicus*, is increasingly transformed into producer/consumer of goods, alienated from the ideal (ontological) self. In this schema, very existence is defined, ironically, by a false *freedom*, which is *bound* by consumerism, an existence in which the human is "subordinated to a teleological economic script that governs our global well-being/ill-being" (McKittrick, 2015, 10).

⁵ Sylvia Wynter speaks of the world economic system as a market system that increasingly made a man's *labor* a commodity ("Ethno" 86), that is to say, reduced man's being to its use value within the matrix of capitalist production.

Out of this seemingly bleak and melancholic disenchantment, Euro-American postmodern social and critical theorists have sought ways of combatting this bleak and demoralizing reality. This *crisis of being* evident in Western societies is what leads commentators such as Fredrick Jameson, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben, and a host of other contemporaneous thinkers within the Euro-American academy to postulate, to theorize, to imagine what they deem to be a more hopeful future. But frequently, critical theory emanating from the “First World” still fails to take full cognizance of the other “Two-thirds world,” and of the historical facts of colonialism, racial slavery, and the formation of empire, that were the inaugurating moments of modernity (Bogues, 2010, 107), and were thus integral to the expansion Western civilization (Gilroy x). Moreover, they assign limited if any discursive space for considerations of the existential experience of the subjects constituting the “Rest” of the world in relation to the “West”.⁶

In response to such critical theories, many Afro-diasporic thinkers have offered commentary on the limitations and constraints of these formulations. Indeed, Anthony Bogues goes so far as to postulate that the critical thought of the West might well have exhausted itself. In questioning the teleological postulate regarding Hegelian philosophy of history in which “the

⁶ In *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (2014), Alexander G. Weheliye highlights the problematic of seeing white European theories – such as those of Michel Foucault (*biopolitics*) and Giorgio Agamben (*bare life*) as existing outside the frames of reductivism and essentialism; for then we see them as immune to the contamination of the specificities of identity politics. He argues that these “conceptual apparatuses” should be reconstructed within a critical consciousness that probes their limitations with respect to “the analytics of race” (7). The very fact that race is excluded from these conceptual frames, Weheliye contends, shows “just how comprehensively the coloniality of Man suffuses the disciplinary and conceptual formations of knowledge we labor under, and how far we have to go in decolonizing these structures” (7).

end in the historical process is the freedom of the subject,” he reminds us that in Hegel’s formulation, Africa had no history and hence was not part of this discursive construction. For Bogues, therefore, “the end of history” connotes “the end of the universalism of the West as the only generative concept and language for the project of human emancipation” (2010, 106). Rex Nettleford invokes history’s central importance in his assertion that “the historical and existential particularities of the Caribbean person and kindred souls in the African diaspora in the West remain a source of energy for their thought and political activism” (2010, 280). For Nettleford, “there can be no end to History (with the upper-case H) as long as equitable balance in the arena of power remains to be achieved (2010, 283).

In terms of Afro-Caribbean philosophy and Africana philosophy, the idea of “shifting the geography of reason” which is the articulated motto of the Caribbean philosophical association, and with which Brodber’s orientation finds accord, suggests the need for a new dialogic, one that can extend the horizon of possibilities for bringing a recuperative and corrective lens to the issue of (black) human subjectivity.

Myal, in its literary representations, explores the fundamental questions of *being* and *ontology* and examines the concept of freedom framed within the discourse of racial slavery, colonialism, emancipation, and the dehumanization that was and still is an inexorable element in defining the modern human. I use the concept, “the metaphysics of the *After-man*” to explicate Brodber’s concern with the *cosmospiritual dimension*⁷ beyond the material/physical dimension

⁷ I borrow the concept, “cosmospiritual dimension” from Melvin Rahming who, in his essay, “Towards a Critical Theory of Spirit: The Insistent Demands of Erna Brodber’s *Myal*,” published in *Changing Currents: Transnational Caribbean Literary and Cultural Criticism* (2006), uses it

and toward a more comprehensive theorization of the human. The term “After-man” in Sylvia Wynter’s formulation provides a discursive space for thinking through culturally conditioned European metaphors and epistemes, and for seeing how Brodber formulates new root metaphors in her theorization of the human. Brodber pushes against the epistemic limitations of Western rationalist and racialized formulations of the human which, in privileging particular modes of being human, have either disputed, ignored, or negated altogether what Sylvia Wynter refers to as alternative “genres of humanness” (McKittrick, 2015, 18).

To contextualize Brodber’s literary discourse, I provide some background of Afro-Caribbean philosophy with specific reference to Paget Henry’s scholarship. In his seminal work, *Caliban’s Reason: Introducing Afro-Caribbean Philosophy* (2000), Henry, who begins the process of mapping the field of Afro-Caribbean philosophy, states that, until recently, asserting the “African heritage” of Afro-Caribbean philosophy would have elicited much skepticism among academic philosophers (2000, 21). This is attributable to the then widely held assumption that there was no such thing as African philosophy, especially since philosophy was presumed to be the product of Europe, not Africa. African “wisdom traditions” are steeped in spirituality, and are defined within the framework of myth, mysticism, sagacity, and proverbial discourses that are structured elements in African cultural systems. From the perspective of Western rationalism, with its emphasis on logico-critical analytical constructs, these tenets of African philosophy and spirituality are generally deemed non-rational, (non-philosophical) systems and, according to these prevailing notions of philosophical discourse, are steeped in primitive mythologies, and a

to reference to a “timeless and all-pervasive presence that operates on individual, communal, and cross-cultural levels” (2006, 307).

belief in witchcraft and magic. Yet it is precisely the infusion of a spiritualist sensibility and ethos that, I posit, is needed to redefine the contours of the discipline, more broadly, and re-focus its core questions.

Henry traces the development of Afro-Caribbean philosophy through its evolutionary stages up to the present, showing shifts in its orientation and focus. He explains contemporary Afro-Caribbean philosophy within the dual paradigm of the historicist and poeticist strains, in which scant attention is accorded to the spiritual continuity within the tradition, except in positing that the philosophy became separated from its spirituality as it progressed through three stages, the first being “traditional African thought” which was embedded in religious discourse (1630-1750), the second, the “African-Christian phase,” (1750-1860), in which Euro-Christianity was introduced with its “world-rejecting” attitude to material existence in favor of salvation in the spiritual hereafter (Henry, 1997, 5); and the third phase, which saw the politicization of Afro-Caribbean philosophy with concerns about the existential threat of non-being within colonial domination. The “anxiety of racial negation” which “displaced the anxieties of fate and guilt” (1997, 14) is made manifest in the existential discourses of resistance against the dehumanizing, colonial-legitimizing images of blacks. Early historicists, then channeled their concerns into an anti-colonialist political activism and the production of oppositional discursive treatises of progressive Afro-Caribbean self-formation that were, ironically, grounded more in the European rationalist worldview than in African origins and African spirituality. This latter emphasis has dominated attitudes toward African Caribbean existence in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

In Brodber's worldview, which characterizes African cultural and belief systems, and inhabits Afro-Caribbean philosophical inheritance, the spiritual world is the most important realm of existence; it infuses the physical, material, social and individual worlds, and is at once immanent and transcendent in its relation to all other spheres of existence (Henry, 1997, 24-25). Hence Brodber brings to the project of Afro-Caribbean self-formation the urgency of spiritual recuperation as a critical imperative.

In elucidating the dilemma of *being* and *existence* that New World Africans faced, Afro-Caribbean philosopher, Paget Henry points to the disjunction at the heart of the experience of slavery – that of spiritual belief. In pre-colonial Africa, the existential concerns in various belief systems centered on the dialectical relation between predestination and choice (1997, 14). Individuals were ascribed agency insofar as the choices they made toward either fulfilling their destiny or going against it were inextricably tied to specific outcomes: a fulfilled and happy existence, or an existence marked by misery. In the condition of enslavement, however, Africans suffered profound adversity that did not result from choice.

What becomes clear is that this experience led to a radical disorientation with respect to their cosmogonies. Their old philosophical vocabulary could neither explain nor accommodate their new situation. Hence, they needed to pose new questions of existence in the anguished condition of enslavement and colonization. Syncretic religions like Myal which were denigrated and inferiorized by mainstream practitioners and promulgators of imperialist Christianity, represent New World Africans' creative and dynamic response to the urgent need to refigure old gods and recover the spiritually and philosophically infused African cosmogonies from which they had become unmoored. The moment of profound existential dislocation which Henry points

to is similarly apprehended in Wynter's theoretical articulations in which she identifies multiple intersections: the rupture of New World Africans' philosophical moorings, the emergence of the capitalist world system, and the implications of the latter for the existential dislocation of Western humanity. Western man and New World African became linked in a peculiar economic relationality and a bizarre ontological hierarchization in which the former conferred on the latter sub-human status as economic property. This ontological relegation and psychic un-freedom, as well as the economic disparity that has persisted in contemporary times as a consequence of the global economic structure and "world system" predicated on the concept of *homo economicus* with its implicit self-interest utility, has arguably diminished the collective humanity. Ultimately, then, any redemption of the African in the New World must entail the redemption of the very concept of humanity, which, by extension, means the redemption also of the West. This calls for a radical revision of the Western episteme of the human, a deconstruction of that "order of consciousness" by which such systems of inequitable racial differentiation have been conceived and perpetuated.

Brodber's work interrogates Western constructs in which European rationalism and African spiritualism are construed as antagonistic polarities and in which spirit has been subordinated in the Euro-hegemonic rationalist/spiritualist dichotomy. It explores these constructs not as oppositional dualities, but rather within a discursive frame that potentiates a productive synergy or a balancing dualism, since the antagonistic irreconcilability of these constructs leads inevitably to an insurmountable impasse.

I want to suggest Brodber's work as an illumination of an African and Afro-Caribbean worldview in literary representation. Her investment in making history and African cosmogonies

foundational to her metaphysics, helps to establish the provenance of African worldviews in reshaping thought and discourse on *being* and *existentiality* in the contemporary Caribbean and in the globalized world.

Brodber's poetics emerge from a marked resistance to cultural imperialism and is characterized by what she refers to in her novel *Louisiana* as the "hegemony of the spirit" (1994, 98); in other words, giving primacy to the spirit as the locus of being. In her repositioning of African diasporic religious traditions as a central element in the Afro-Caribbean cultural matrix, Brodber asserts a radical literary aesthetic, positing these traditions as the basis for the recuperation of the Afrodiasporan self. Moreover, the focus on spirituality in her fiction points to its central importance in re-defining the Afro-Caribbean subject in terms that deconstruct the colonial legacies of Anti-African-ness, and acknowledge spiritual intelligence as a bone fide, credible epistemological source. While the novel emanates from the historical, cultural, and geographical specificities of the Jamaican folk, and focuses on the practice of Myal, and Kumina, it expands and broadens the terrain of human spirituality, and enables us to see these how these African-derived belief systems, existing as they do within ancient wisdom traditions, bequeath "the imperishable resources for sustainable empowerment and life-enhancing transformations" (Stewart xviii) and provide an equitable epistemological frame for envisioning a collective humanity.

Moreover, that Brodber's excavation of an African /Afro-Caribbean metaphysics serves ultimately as the conduit of liberation demonstrates the reassertion of African epistemologies disavowed within Westernist systems of knowledge. As the energizing principle in Brodber's work, Myal is not only evidenced in the overarching worldview she advances, but is replicated in

the reconstruction of the history that informs the work and its context; it is deployed in the textual structure, and in the characterization.

Brodber's novel enacts a transformation of Afro-Caribbean consciousness through the process of its protagonists locating and tapping into a space that is accessed via the interstices of the collision between Christianity and Afro-Caribbean spirituality. Spiritual and psychic transformation is ultimately achieved through the reclamation of the dispossessed self. Brodber sees Myal as having the capacity to be infinitely responsive to historical, cultural, and social dynamics. Myal attempts to reassemble the ghostly bodies of those African and Afrodiasporic souls that were both carried and scattered along the Middle Passage in what Wilson Harris⁸ refers to as a "dislocation of a chain of miles" (Harris, 1990, 157); it opens "a limbo gateway between Africa and the Caribbean"; essentially functioning as the "phantom limb of dismembered slave and god" (1990, 158). Myal thus reconstruct a submerged worldview, resurrects alternative metaphysical spaces of being, and enables cultural and communal re-gathering.

Within Afro-Caribbean scholarship, in the fields of religion, anthropology, sociology, political science, linguistics, and history, Myal has spawned a considerable range of theorization. As a ritual practice, it was first acknowledged and commented upon by English historian, Edward Long and other colonialists who visited Jamaica in the mid-eighteenth century, where seemingly it emerged for the first time during the Tacky rebellion of 1760. Barry Chevannes⁹

⁸ Bundy, Andrew, ed. *Wilson Harris: The Unfinished Genesis of the Imagination*. London: Routledge, 1999.

⁹ Chevannes suggests that while Myal initially came to the attention of Europeans during the Taki Rebellion of 1760, it was quite likely in a long "gestation" period prior to that date. He

contends, however, that Myal existed long before its evidentiary emergence in 1760 even though little was known about its specific structure and beliefs in its earliest form (1995, 17-18).

According to Joseph J. Williams,¹⁰ Myal is derived from an old Ashanti tribal religion that derived its name from the Myal dance, which formed a critical part of the ritual that expressed veneration for deities and accorded tributes to the ancestors. In this Ashanti belief system, Williams asserts, Okomfo and Obayifo represent antithetical elements of good and evil, respectively (1934, 73). In Myal's translation in the New World context, Williams asserts, *Accompong* was the godhead and *Sasabonsum* was the devil; in the rivalry between the two, Okomfo openly combated the Obayifo "with the force of Ashanti religious tradition and sentiment to support him" (1934, 73). Drawing an analogous relationship with the New World context between Obeah and Myal, Williams emphasizes the antagonistic relationship between Obeah and Myal practitioners. Yet he also asserts that there was a "confederation" between Myal and its rival, Obeah, when it came to fighting their common oppressor, the white colonizer (1932, 160).

Concurring with Williams' view, some early-contemporary scholars of Afro-Caribbean religions have tended toward the belief that Myal and Obeah are separate movements, claiming that while Obeah focuses on nefarious, maleficent practices, Myal involves the restoration of

concludes that Myal enabled the unification of disparate African tribal groups, which became organized along pan-African lines.

¹⁰ Williams was a cultural anthropologist and a professor at Boston College Graduate School, who conducted field studies in Jamaica in the early 1900s and published several volumes based on his anthropological research in Jamaica, including *Voodooes and Obeahs* (Forgotten Books, 2007) and *Psychic Phenomena of Jamaica* (Dial Press, 1934)

health, spirit possession, and rapturous worship. Maureen Warner-Lewis¹¹, for example, identifying clear linguistic links between Myal and Central African language retentions in Jamaica, speculates that the term *mayaal* in common use in Jamaica (spelt Myal) derives from *mayaal*, which refers to “spiritual power and/or a person possessing spiritual power on behalf of another” (1932, 190). She identifies its direct cognate in the Kikonga language of the religious tradition in which there is a differentiation between beneficent power force, which, in the Jamaican context is identified as a source of “good obeah” or “healing sorcery” as distinguished from Obeah or obiya, “which inflicted harm” (1932, 190).

More recent scholarship suggests a possible synergy between the two practices. Nathaniel Murrell,¹² for example, asserts that, “Myal may not have been an anit-Obeah movement with ‘healthier practices’ than Obeah as is generally believed” (2010, 251) since commentators on African religion in pre-emancipation Jamaica tended to associate all of these movements with Obeah and, as such, blurred lines of distinction. Margarite Fernandez Olmas and Lizbeth Paravisini Gebert¹³ similarly suggest that Myal is a version of Obeah, a specialized form that was practiced only in Jamaica. They point to the retention of elements of African-derived religiosity not observed in the Obeah practice in other parts of the Anglophone Caribbean. The Myal dance, for example, is one such element. Seen as an integral part of the Myal ritual, the dance “linked the Jamaican slaves to the worship of an West African pantheon of gods from which they had

¹¹ Warner-Lewis, Maureen. *Central Africa in the Caribbean: Transcending Time, Transforming Cultures*. Kingston: UWI P, 2003.

¹² Murrell, Nathaniel. *Afro-Caribbean Religions: An Introduction to Their Historical, Cultural & Sacred Traditions*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2010.

¹³ Fernandez Olmos, Margarite and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert. *Creole Religions of the Caribbean: An Introduction from Vodou and Santeria to Obeah and Espiritismo*. New York: New York UP, 2011.

been separated when transported to the New World and which used drums, dancing, dreams, and spirit possession as part of organized veneration of both deities and ancestors” (2010, 174). Most compelling, however, is Stewart’s explanation that:

The tendency to characterize Obeah as “bad magic” and Myal as “good magic” or as Obeah’s nemesis might well be founded upon Western Christian moral theology, which conceives good and evil as contradistinctive forces. Because Obeah was officially condemned as sorcery early in Jamaican history and because Whites were determined to portray Obeah as a menace to all of Jamaican society (including enslaved Africans), scholars, writing with this Western Christian bias, assume that a dichotomy always existed between Obeah and Myal (2005, 62).

It can be argued, then, that Myal as an Afro-Jamaican religion, a creolized West Central African traditional religion, is, as Warner-Lewis describes it, “an amalgamation of religious observances” (2003, 190).

Myal simultaneously demonstrates elements of traditional African religious conventions and Christian practice. It is characterized by a collective emphasis on preventing misfortune and maximizing good fortune for the community, and on the use of rituals, symbols and charms to protect the community from disease and death. While it has its focus primarily on spiritual healing and engages a tradition of pharmacopeia and initiatory rites, it also manifests features of Christian religious practice, comprising what Dianne Stewart refers to as “Christian Myalist religion.” Stewart contends that “the identity of the Native Baptists was distinguishable from that

of their comrades who embraced Euro-missionary Christianity” (2005, 129) and that “the foundational religious structure of the Native Baptist movement was Myal” (2005, 129).¹⁴

Myal underwent significant transformation in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries with the arrival of white Protestant missionaries and, later, African American Baptists, which heralded its syncretization with these new forms of Christian practice and ushered in Revivalism. Yet despite the sustained influences of Protestant Christianity and the historical proscription of governing authorities in the form of anti-Myal legislation, Myal’s continual reemergence indicates what Murrell refers to as the manifestation of a “much deeper consciousness” among Myalists and other creole spiritualities (2010, 247).

Murrell argues that Myal emerged out of the need of enslaved Africans to “create and preserve a coherent worldview from the fragments of their home institutions, from their broken lives, and from the contradictions of the Jamaican Christian culture” (2010, 246). More than this, however, is its political and cultural significance in catalyzing cohesiveness among disparate African tribal groups that divided along the lines of ethnic differentiation. Hence, we see Myal’s provenance in its pragmatic use as a galvanizing force in achieving spiritual unity among African ethnic groups in their resistance to oppression. Barry Chevannes has observed that Myal enabled slave rebellions “to be organized on pan-African instead of strictly ethnic lines for the

¹⁴ *In Three Eyes for the Journey: African Dimension of the Jamaican Religious Experience* (2005), Dianne M. Stewart makes the argument that the Christian Myalism of the Native Baptists demonstrated foundational aspects of traditional African-derived belief systems, namely, “communotheism (a community of divinities and invisible powers, including the Christian Trinity),” in addition to spirit possession, belief in neutral mystical powers, and enacted the Obeah ritual of oath taking as indicated by Samuel Sharpe’s accomplices in the 1831-1832 revolts” (129). Interestingly, then, Reverend Simpson, the Native Baptist preacher in Brodber’s novel is, in many ways aligned with these practices and is an important member of the Myal cohort in the Grove Town community.

first time in the history of the Africans in Jamaica” (1995, 17). In this way, it engendered a spirit of cooperation and common purpose during rebellions and slave uprisings. Schuler contends that “the Myal tradition formed the core of a strong and self-confident counter-culture,” (1995, 76) that sought to dismantle the iniquities of the post-slavery period by challenging these injustices both in its secret rituals at the spiritual level and in more overt/visible public displays of protest. This challenge often led to confrontations with the governing authorities who Myalists perceived as agents of adversity. Clearly, then, the Yoruba, Akan-Ashanti, and Kongo ethnic groups who came to comprise the strong Myalist presence in pre-and-post slavery Jamaica represented an ideology that was antithetical to that inherent in colonial culture and displayed a tenacious spirit of resistance to enslavement and oppression.

Centered within African/Afro-Caribbean cosmogony and metaphysics, Myal serves as the organizing frame for Brodber’s dialectical project. It is a principle that serves as both the message and the architectonics of the literary/philosophical project, offering a vision of the cosmos in which the divine, the human, the animal, and the vegetal constitute interlocking worlds. It is also based on a cosmology that articulates what it means to be fully human on the physical and psychic levels. Within the context of the current work, Myal is a spiritually infused system whose transformative capacity makes it responsiveness to historical dynamics.

Brodber’s novel, set in early twentieth century rural Jamaica, explores a world in which the daily activities, belief systems, and challenges of the people of Grove Town, St. Thomas are firmly anchored in a spiritual ethos. The structured life of this formerly enslaved population is grounded in a heightened consciousness of the spiritual, apprehended through various interpretive frames derived as much from their African spiritual/religious heritage as from their

experience of colonization and colonial Christianity. The spirit orientations shaped by these exigencies have wrought Afro-Christian and other indigenous/indiginized religious forms including Myal and Kumina. Indeed, many different religious orientations are evident in this small community: Protestantism/Methodism is represented by Reverend William Brassington, the biracial Jamaican-born, British-raised pastor who disavows the legitimacy of the Afro-spiritualism of the Grove Town people; his wife, Maydene Brassington, on the other hand, embraces the spiritism of the community, early shows an affinity with Myal and Kumina and is later inducted as a member of the Myal cohort; Native Baptist preacher, Reverend Musgrave Simpson, is simultaneously an extra-human essence, and an ancient ancestral spirit that inhabits an expanded temporality and an elevated/evolved consciousness; Miss Agatha Paisley is the head of the Kumina Tabernacle whose religious practice of “ecstatic spiritism”¹⁵ invokes divination, and manifestation. Ole African is a member of the group that comprises the Myal cohort, the community of mystics; his philosophical sagacity is revealed in his cryptic, enigmatic pronouncement, “the half has never been told”(1999, 40), alluding as much to the need for a recuperative and corrective lens in Caribbean historiography as to the need for transmission and receipt of ancestral wisdom. Mas Cyrus, another member of the community of mystics –is the forest-dwelling herbalist, or roots-worker, whose epistemological grounding and curative

¹⁵ In *Trance and Modernity in the Southern Caribbean* (2011), Keith E. McNeal uses the term, “ecstatic spiritism” to refer to some varieties of Afro-Caribbean spiritual practice in which mediumship is the means by which one “become[s] the locus for the divine in human form” (19), or “catches power,” interacting with devotees to effect healing. He uses the concept of “manifestation” to describe the adept becoming ‘activated’ and manifesting spiritual power, (18) in contradistinction to the concept of “possession,” which usually refers to the “intrusion by demons, malevolent spirits” (19). In *Myal*, Miss Gatha is presented as a force understood to be imbued with “mystical energy tapped for spiritual purpose” (16), specifically, for the practice of effecting healing.

practices are situated outside of the conventions of Western medicine and summon a “higher” knowledge, or what, in the Afro-Caribbean vernacular, is referred to as “High Science.”¹⁶

The novel’s highly allusive interwoven narratives not only depict the community’s overt struggle against malevolent powers that seek to destabilize it through engendering disharmony and spiritual disequilibrium among its members, but these narratives also show the ways in which colonial history and conquest have shaped the community, and how the Grove Town community has sought to contest these calamities of history. The central theme of the novel, “spirit thievery,” is depicted in multiple ways, but is particularly focalized in two narrative threads. One of these threads is the story of nineteen year-old biracial Ella O’Grady, whose academic, psycho-emotional, and social potential is stymied by a combination of factors: the deleterious colonial education system that produces self-alienation and psychic disarticulation, the social ostracism of the Grove Town community toward Ella as a “thin lip, pointed nose soul in a round face, thick lip, big eye country” (1999, 8); Ella’s relationship with her Anglo-American husband, Selwyn Langley, who fuels his desire for material accumulation by manipulating Ella’s life story, transforming it into a hideous spectacle for stage and film, in ways that diminish her humanity and induce psychological breakdown. The other narrative strand concerns fifteen-year old Anita, the academically gifted daughter of Euphemia, a Grove Town market woman, whose youth and sexual energy are under siege by Mas Levi, Deacon in the

¹⁶ In the *Dictionary of the English/Creole of Trinidad and Tobago* (2008) edited by Lise Winer, “High Science” is defined as a type of Obeah or science practiced with reference to a body of specific texts. There is a distinction drawn between science as conceived within Obeah practice and within Euro-spiritualist practice. The entry denotes that while the themes of Obeah are “hot, jealous, rural and related to local interests,” European science is “cold, calculating, urban, elitist and more obviously dedicated to self-interest” (431). High Science in the context of Mas Cyrus’s work refers to an elevated level of spiritual cognition and mastery.

Native Baptist church and covert obeah practitioner; Levi resorts to the malevolent use of necromancy in his bid to regain his sexual potency by draining and appropriating Anita's vitality. Particularly unsettling is the fact that Mas Levy is a stalwart of the Baptist church, the epitome of moral certitude, and as such, is the most unlikely member of the community to fall under suspicion, given his status as "incorruptible" (1999, 31).

The struggle of the community to restore social and spiritual equilibrium, presented microcosmically as Ella's and Anita's struggle over their respective adversaries reflects the community's quest, also, for the recognized legitimacy of all spiritual orientations. The looming threat of disunity is based as much on the differing spiritual alignments of the community membership as on its racial and social hierarchies that have their roots in slavery. Brodber's mapping of this community, barely eighty years out of slavery, reveals not only the fissures evident in communal relations, but also, the real potential for cooperative coexistence, so critical for the survival and sustenance of the community. The novel challenges the primacy of "imperial" Christianity, which seeks to assert itself as the undergirding philosophy of the Grove Town community, although Afro-Christianity functions as part of a "dual membership" of religious affiliation in which Afro-Christian spirituality¹⁷ has as much eminence as Euro-Christianity, if not more.

¹⁷ In *Betwixt and Between: Explorations in an African –Caribbean Mindscape* (2006). Barry Chevannes makes the point that there is a "high religious mobility between churches" in contemporary Caribbean society and that the "dual membership phenomenon" is very much in evidence. People become members of "mainline churches" in order to gain access to upward social and economic mobility and thereby improve their social standing, but "retain their orientation and allegiance to the traditional in order to access channels of spiritual power and satisfaction" (60).

With all of these spiritually aware members of the Grove Town community, Brodber provides us a clear sense of the ways in which “the mystical and the occult intervene in quotidian secular human affairs” (Odjo, 2017, 197), and the ways in which the different spiritual and religious orientations contend for preeminence within the small community. Reverend Brassington, with his demystified Christian theology and Enlightenment rationality, vies for dominance, seeking to imbue Grove Town inhabitants with the “progressive” ideals of Euro-Christian orthodoxy and to subdue their proclivities toward what he views as superstition and necromancy, rather than honoring the spiritual ethos of this predominantly Afro-Caribbean community. Brassington’s dismissive attitude toward Grove Town spirituality belies his awareness that he “would need a sledge hammer to move Grove Town,” (2017, 14) since he knows that they would vehemently “resist his efforts to separate them from their understanding of life” (2017, 19).

Emerging, as these modes of Afro-spiritual practice do, out of a “genealogy of resistance”¹⁸ to Euro-Christian dominance and repression of African religiosity (Stewart, 2005, xvii), they represent the profound and sustained struggle against the annihilation of African cultural heritage and spiritual inheritance that formed the liberation praxis among Afro-Jamaicans. As Dianne Stewart asserts, “The very fact that [institutions such as Native Baptist, Revival Zion, Kumina, Myal] are operative today is evidence that their nineteenth-century devotees were successful in thwarting European Christianity and its toxic consequences for people of African descent within their communal religious formation” (2005, xvii). Brassington

¹⁸ I borrow this phrase from the work of Marlene NourbeSe Philip, who titles her theoretical text: *A Genealogy of Resistance: And Other Essays* (1998). Here, it speaks to the tradition of resistance that became entrenched in the colonized Caribbean.

as an instrument of Western religio-cultural control represents an oppositional religious ethos insofar as he seeks to undermine the viability of African-derived religions; in other words, Brassington exemplifies spirit thievery, as centralized and thematized throughout the novel.

Maydene Brassington eschews the authority vested in her husband as the Methodist minister in charge of the parish of St. Thomas since it engenders in him an imperialistic impulse and endows him with the power to “exorcise and replace” the Morant Bay congregation’s core spirituality, leaving congregants “sitting empty in church, unable to read the responses, just waiting for the word that comes out of [William Brassington’s] mouth” (1999, 18). Mydene observes, “He has reduced [his congregants] to children” (1999, 19), and wishes that instead her husband “could find a way of linking what they know with what he wants them to know” (1999, 19); she questions the efficacy of his missionary-quest to supplant a people’s cosmogony and dislodge them from their metaphysical understanding of themselves. Maydene’s more evolved understanding of spiritual mysticism abjures the “stultified bourgeois conventionality and lack of imagination” (Kortenaar, 2011, 145) with which her husband approaches his assignment as the head of the St. Thomas Methodist mission. Establishing a Methodist mission and inducing the people of Grove Town into this brand of discipleship is, however, an entirely different challenge, one that requires Reverend Brassington’s recourse to manipulative ploys to win congregants to his fellowship (as, for example, when he vies to prepare Mary and Taylor for the sacrament of marriage instead of risking them going to Reverend Simpson, the Baptist minister). Unsettled by his wife’s frequent visits to Grove Town, her gradual integration into the affairs of its citizens, and her progressive spiritual transformation, Brassington thinks it unseemly “that Maydene should be trying to get herself involved in...the exotic” (1999, 87) and that she should become

immersed in the spiritual practice of the people of Grove Town, which are anathema to his ministry's ethos.

This polarized positionality that Brassington assumes is reflected in the overt tension between himself and other spiritual leaders of the community including Miss Gatha of the Kumina Tabernacle, whose practice, involving spirit mediumship and “catching power,”¹⁹ channeling devotees ‘back to Africa’ (1999, 7) via the ritualistic drumming, and the ecstatic praxis of Kumina is an affront to his Judeo-Christian decorum. Reverend Simpson of the Native Baptist Church is, like Miss Gatha, on the other side of this polarity that represents oppositional modes of cognition. And while Maydene “found this Baptist parson quite a reasonable man...a clear message came from her husband that he would prefer if she kept him at a distance” (1999, 15). Brassington's response to Maydene's involvement with Miss Gatha reflects a similar displeasure. Miss Gatha with her “long multi-coloured dress” and “her head-wrap cut across her ears...and the big wooden wheels [that] rocked in her ears” (1999, 18) presents a formidable challenge to his conservative and uncompromising Christianity. Maydene cogitates that Brassington “would want Miss Gatha to give up her headdress and put on my hat”, (1999, 18); in other words, he would require Miss Gatha to discard her Kumina regalia and don a Western headdress that conforms to his vision of “respectability.” But beyond the mere visual dimension, there is the implicit requirement that Miss Gatha relinquish the mode of cognition that governs her own metaphysical understanding in acquiescence to another (his own) order of knowledge. To “put on [Maydene's] hat” is to submit to an ‘other’ onto-theology, an “alter-native”

¹⁹ McNeal, Keith E. *Trance and Modernity in the Southern Caribbean: African and Hindu Popular Religions in Trinidad and Tobago*. Gainesville: UP of Florida, 2011. 15

explanation of *being*, to relinquish ownership of her own head, so to speak. While Maydene understands the profound violation implied by this proposition, Brassington sees it merely as the sensible and rational promotion of a state of homogeneity in which “all...in the fellowship behave the same way” (1999, 18).

So alienated is Brassington from the Grove Town community that he is reluctant to endorse his wife’s socializing, especially with members of their clergy and other spiritual leaders. Lassissi Odjo observes, “In Brodber’s artistic mediation of codes and values, the staunch Christianist Brassington is an oppressive force - an openly contemptuous detractor of Afro-Caribbean spirituality who reminds one of the horrors of the Middle Passage and the inhumanity of the harsh plantation system in the Americas” (1994, 196). While Odjo’s assessment of Brassington may seem somewhat overstated, the analogies he uses serve nonetheless to convey the imperious view of Brassington and his assumed religious superiority. Brassington muses that Grove Town people “have a far way to go and a far way [they can go but [they] must understand how far back [they] are and submit so that [they] can learn” (1999, 21). His wife says of him that he “[wants] people to empty themselves in front of him so that he can remodel them into shapes of which he approves” (1999, 21).

Serving as an intermediary between her husband and the people of Grove Town, Maydene Brassington is a critical element in Brodber’s dialectic. Within the tensions of the oppositional codes of the novel, Maydene functions as the locus of hybridity. Existing on the “cusp,” “the point where two curves meet...the meeting of two disparate points” (1999, 13), she attempts to negotiate her husband’s re-entry into the Grove Town and ameliorate the “unhealthy relationship” (1999, 14) that has been allowed to fester over time. As the “monitor of her

husband's soul" (1999, 14), Maydene tries to broker a place for him in this alienated space. Maydene is thus the symbolic point of convergence between two disparate cosmologies – Euro-Christianity and Afro-Caribbean Spirituality, and is thus the embodied negation of religious hierarchy and purity.

This locus of convergence is, in Homi Bhabha's figuration, defined as the "Third Space of [cultural] enunciation," by which Bhabha means a space of productive ambivalence that renders any notions of cultural/religious hierarchy and purity indefensible. Rather, it makes the construction of meaning an ambivalent process, challenging the historical notion of cultural identity as a homogenizing force that is validated by a single originary Past (1994, 37). Hybridity thus "reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal" of other knowledges so that these "discredited knowledges"²⁰ intervene upon the dominant discourse, demolishing the basis of its authority (1994, 114). In this way, hybridity is seen "not [as] a third term that resolves the tension between two cultures [two discourses, two ideologies, two modes of cognition]...in a dialectical play of recognition" (1994, 114); but rather, as a space in which the hybrid is ever aware of "the split screen of the self and its doubling, the hybrid" (1994, 114). This idea of the simultaneous habitation of contiguous spaces provides a productive frame for decoding the duality that characterizes not only Maydene, the Euro-Christian member of the community, who is insinuated into the Afro-Spiritual space, but also the Afro-Jamaican members of the Myal cohort, for whom this dual habitation is continually mediated by several strategic negotiations:

²⁰ In "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation" Toni Morrison refers to "discredited knowledge" (*Margins* 61) as that which has been invalidated within Western paradigms by virtue of the fact that the bearers of such knowledge (African Americans/African diaspora peoples) have themselves been discredited. Morrison refers specifically to African cosmologies and ways of knowing that do not accord with Western worldviews.

between differential spatio-temporal realities, and between different physical and metaphysical being-nesses.

Given that African-derived practices like Obeah, Myal and Kumina have always existed alongside and intersected with Christian denominations such as Presbyterian and Catholic sects established by White missionaries and evangelists, and by Baptist and Pentecostal branches promulgated by black preachers,²¹ the complex religiosity and spiritual consciousness of Afro-Jamaicans is to be understood within the diverse and heightened spiritual intelligence of practitioners who, as Stewart asserts, “navigated multiple worlds, cultural locations, and permutations in creating stable African-oriented religious mechanisms for self-preservation and self-representation” (1994, 58). Applying Bhabha’s “Third Space” theory to the context of Afro-Jamaican spiritual enunciation, then, enables a reading of this space as one within which the understanding of Afro-Caribbean spiritual agency and selfhood is *negotiated*, not subordinated by, nor subsumed within the hierarchized hegemony of Euro-Christian orthodoxy and its concomitant limited designations of personhood. It is within this location that the role of the highly evolved and spiritually interconnected Myal cohort must be apprehended and its articulation of an alternative discourse on spirituality and humanity must be mapped.

²¹ Dianne Stewart identifies in *Three Eyes for the Journey: African Dimensions of the Jamaican Religious Experience* (2005) three trajectories in the religiosity of blacks in the African diaspora that have “cross-fertilized each other over the past five centuries of Black presence in the Caribbean and the Americas” (xvi): these include the prevailing presence of African-derived religion, the Christianization of black communities by both black Christian denominations, and denominations established by White missionaries, and religious formations arising out of a black nationalist ethos including “post-Christian” figurations like Rastafari, Nation of Islam, and Black Judaism. These, she asserts, have “unfolded within the shadow of hegemonic Eurocentric Christian institutions” and have consequently been coded within ambiguous identities and practices resulting from “their ritual uses of material from both African-based and Euro-Christian traditions” (xvi).

Members of the Myal cohort – Mas Cyrus, Reverend Simpson, Miss Gatha, Maydene Brassington, and Ole African – inhabit multiple spatio-temporal, cognitive, and corporeal-spiritual dimensions. The corporeal/spiritual form is further dimensionalized by Brodber's deployment of the totemic principle, which ascribes to each of the members a spiritual connection with a particular totemic animal. According to John S. Mbiti, "the totem is the visible symbol of unity, for kinship of belongingness, of togetherness, and common affinity" (2006, 103). When studied from the perspective of Western ethnography or ethno-anthropology, totemism has historically connoted primitive peoples and primitive beliefs; however, Brodber deconstructs the negatively-associated "primitivism" in her revision of the concept, and anchors it within a paradigm of African metaphysics that facilitates our understanding of the totemic principle as one representing a mystical bond of unity within the group and a symbol of spiritual accord and social cohesion. Accordingly, the totem interacts with the individual and functions as his/her double. It is via this spiritual connection with their respective doubles that Mas Cyrus as Percy the Chick, Reverend Simpson, as Dan the Dog, Miss Gatha, as Mother Hen, Maydene Brassington, as White Hen, and Ole African, as Willie the Pig communicate with each other across time and space. Totems thus speak to the confluence of the physical and metaphysical.

In addition to their habitation of expansive physical and psychic space, the Myal cohort, while governed by conventional modes of cognition – perceiving and knowing through the natural senses - also operate by noesis, that is, acquiring knowledge intuitively at the threshold of human and divine intellect²² This inner wisdom directs their understanding of the complexities

²² The Institute of Noetic Sciences explains the concept of "noesis" as one derived from the Greek, "noetikos" meaning "inner wisdom, direct knowing, or subjective understanding"

and mysteries of life that defy conventional rational/scientific epistemology. Myalists recognize and inhabit different knowledge systems and wisdom traditions that are co-equal elements in a comprehensive understanding of *being and consciousness*. In other words, the hybrid space that this community of mystics inhabits makes available an expansive range of cognitive, and spatio-temporal modalities from a locus of “spiritual hegemony” or spirit-centeredness.

While these entities occupy the physical world of Grove Town, they also inhabit the cosmic sphere that extends beyond this narrow precinct; they are at once multi-millennarian and fully grounded in present time. Establishing a temporality that dislocates Western linear conceptions of time structured and defined by conquest, *Myal*, with its own metaphysics of time, asserts a history, which, while profoundly affected by the fact of conquest, is not *defined* by it. The novel is concerned with presenting an alternative to “conventional” history and with subverting a temporality marked with the designations “pre-colonial,” “colonial,” and “postcolonial.” The dialogue between Dan (Reverend Simpson) and Willie (Ole African) exemplifies an expansive space of habitation; they occupy an extended timeframe that dates back to earlier centuries, which enables them to discuss “things ancient and modern” (1999, 65). The thematization both of colonial history and a time that predates colonial history shows Brodber’s investment in resurrecting the voices, and “looking for the faces”²³ of ancestors that have been

(www.noetic.org). Noesis is a branch of metaphysics in philosophy whose focus is on examining modes of deriving knowledge through the intellect and intuition.

²³ In the preface of her published dissertation, *The Second Generation of Freeman in Jamaica, 1907-1944* (2004), Brodber refers to a statement by Kamau Brathwaite, which has impacted both her scholarly and creative work. Brathwaite, who was then her dissertation supervisor, insisted that any scholarship on slavery, and on black people in general, should look for the “face” of the enslaved. Hence, in her dissertation project as well as other academic and literary projects dealing with the subject of black people, she has endeavored to “contribute to the portraiture of

elided in the conventional history both of Africa and the Caribbean. She reconstructs these subjects of history, situating them within a temporality that eschews the truncated versions of African and Afro-Caribbean history.

In Brodber's formulation, the internal awareness of time is mapped onto the external world of her characters. Thus, the fictional work performs the function of excavating the past, "digging deep," according to Glissant, to reconstruct the diachronic events of a "tormented chronology" (1989, 65). Since, as Glissant observes, "the Caribbean notion of time was fixed in the void of an imposed non-history,"²⁴ Brodber elaborates a theory of time, shaped within the genre of the historical/philosophical novel, that reconciles the variable modalities of historical and fictional time, in order to reconstruct the "lost" history as the medium through which the Afro-Caribbean person comes to a fuller consciousness of self. She challenges the way history itself is produced and theorized, recognizing the elisions and ambiguities in historical narratives concerning what actually occurred and what is said to have occurred (Trouillot, 1995, 3). Michel-Rolph Trouillot contends that, "Only through the overlap [of historical representations] can we discover the differential exercise of power that makes some narratives possible and silences others" (1995, 25). In her literary dialectic, Brodber asserts the power to expand chronological boundaries to accommodate the narrative that, in her view, needs to be told.

The idea of 'seeing' the entire experience of the formerly enslaved Afro-Caribbean people *as a whole*, and indeed of 'seeing' them in their African context prior to the advent of

this 'face'," writing in a style that is accessible, and that "allow[s] the descendants of the enslaved, as much as academics, to 'see' their own 'face'" (xi).

²⁴ Glissant, Edouard. *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*. Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1989.

transatlantic slavery compels Brodber to create an ontology of time that can redress the abbreviated and truncated history of the African diasporic subject. She engages a non-linear narrative modality to access past and present time and challenges the notion of time as unidirectional and unrecoverable²⁵ by rendering transhistorical ancestral spirits who inhabit both past and present. Brodber constructs a dialogic exchange that focuses on the need for a reawakening of Afro-Caribbean consciousness, for the suturing of the psychic wound occasioned by the transatlantic slave trade. Ole African (Willie) asserts, “They split man from his self...Remember that Dan? Six hundred years ago, five hundred years ago, four hundred years ago and here in those 1760s: ‘We’ll quiet them and send them back to their tacky old ships.’ Remember?” (1999, 67). The 1760 event is a significant signpost in the history of Myal, which according to Barry Chavannes “first became evident in the Tacky rebellion of 1760 when, for the

²⁵ The nature of time has long been a preoccupation in philosophical thought and its interpretations and understandings have been as variable as the different cultures in which its meaning and essence have been contemplated. In ancient African, Greek, and other traditional societies in which mythology functioned as the organizing principle of knowledge systems, time was conceived as cyclic, and, as Mircea Eliade shows in *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (1959), time was thought to be reversible and recoverable and thus to exist as an “eternal mythical present that is periodically reintegrated by means of rites” (70). In Judeo-Christian re-figurations, the replacement of mythology by Christian Theology set events of Christianity within a chronological frame such that the transhistoricity of the mythical cosmogonic occurrences of ancient religions no longer manifest in the same way in Christianity. Instead, Christian cosmogony is fixed in *historical* time (as opposed to what Eliade calls *sacred* time – the time in which rites re-actualize sacred events of mythic origins) and by orienting the system of belief around the historical event of Jesus’ life, time became linear, “according decisive importance to the historical event...[and] denying it any possibility of revealing a transhistorical, soteriological intent” (112). The reconfiguration of time as chronology, as a straight line, has given rise to its theorization as “the arrow of time,” a concept which negates the possibility of its reversibility and which structures time as non-cyclic. This concept is attributed to British astronomer Arthur Eddington who, in his 1929 book, *The Nature of the Physical World*, asserts the “one-way direction” or “asymmetry” of time.

first time in the history of the slaves, a rebellion was planned and staged, incorporating people of different tribal origins” (1995, 6).

The dialogue in which these ancient spirits (Percy, Willie, and Dan) engage reveals their recollection of “a time six hundred years ago” (1999, 38), as Dan maps in nostalgic register the camaraderie and harmonious collaborations that he shared with his Myal cohort. Here, Brodber not only charts significant signposts in African history – the allusion to astronomy as an important science in Africa in the early 1400s²⁶ when “no one knows the stars better than [Perce]” (1999, 38); the reference to the early 1500s when “those nameless haunts” invaded Africa with their “tacky old ships” (1999, 39), and reference to 1760, referring to the Tacky rebellion in Jamaica – she also asserts a counter discourse to the history promulgated by the West by mapping the inception of Myal in Jamaica as a driving force behind slave rebellions, as embodying a *spirituality of resistance*.

Even while Myal’s historical legacy clearly demonstrates the centuries-long collective struggle for emancipation from European dominance, it is also seen in the novel as the central force in individual healing. Anita’s and Ella’s healing and metamorphosis delineate the process of their coming to their own metaphysical and ontological liberation, a consciousness that each arrives at through the intervention and guidance of the Myal cohort – in Anita’s case, initiated by Miss Gatha, and in Ella’s case, by Mas Cyrus. It is the entire Myal confederate, including Ole African, Maydene, and Reverend Simpson, however, that effects the cure, demonstrating the ways in which ancient spirits function as channels of spiritual liberation and empowerment.

²⁶ In his essay, “The Lost Sciences of Africa: An Overview,” published in *Blacks in Science: Ancient and Modern* (1983), Ivan Van Sertima discusses the significant discoveries in the field of Astronomy that several ancient African civilizations made.

To effect Anita's cure, Miss Gatha becomes the medium through which spirit is made manifest; she becomes part of a ritual in which incantation, drumming, procession, and transmutation play integral parts. Miss Gatha makes her way to the Baptist Manse incanting the mystical message, "Nine times three is twenty-seven. Three times three times three" (1999, 72), a strategy to counter and neutralize Mas Levi's malevolent intent. Her progress down the main street, her body angled 45 degrees from the ground (1999, 70), takes her finally to the Kumina tabernacle. Her body symbolizes the assertion of spiritual power. Reading her body as spatial text, Wilson Harris describes Miss Gatha as "a conversion of boundaries" (1990, 89); put another way, she is the convergence of multiple borders: the embodied articulation of several religious/spiritual practices – Euro-Christian, African, Afro-Caribbean – as well as an amalgam of forms of consciousness in which "temporalities of the past (Africa) and the present (the Caribbean communities) are made manifest" (Odjo, 2017, 196).

Miss Gatha's entry into the Kumina Tabernacle is met by a multitude of spirits who are both participants in and witnesses to the healing ritual. In her transmogrification, her visage changes from that of a sixty-year-old woman to that of the fifteen year old Anita and back again (1999, 73), transmitting healing to Anita through the power that spirit exerts over (un)natural forces. The ritual counteracts Mas Levi's evil attempt to interrupt and "reverse the natural flow of life" and disrupt the cosmic order. Miss Gatha's eventual utterance, "It is finished," concludes the ritual, renders death to Mas Levi, and restores balance to Anita's life and equilibrium to the Grove Town community.

Ella's healing, like Anita's, commences with ritual when, upon Maydene's suggestion, Reverend Brassington takes Ella to Mas Cyrus's secluded grove so that the herbalist can treat her

malady. Mas Cyrus immediately observes the difference between the humility of his people who seek his help and the haughty attitude of the “trained-minded” (1999, 1) biracial people who come to him with their own diagnosis. Yet, since Cyrus is not a medical doctor in the Western sense, Brassington’s submission to him clearly shows his acknowledgement of the need for a different kind of intervention than his own Euro-Christian orthodoxy. Cyrus’s epistemology, situated outside of the conventional medical practice, summons “higher” knowledge, not rational scientism. This transaction heralds an important transformation in Brassington that becomes evident when, in his discourse with Reverend Simpson about Ella and more broadly, about the phenomenon of zombification, Brassington demonstrates marked deference to Simpson’s intellect and spiritual acumen.

Cyrus initiates the cure for Ella’s dis-ease which has catapulted her into a hollowed, “zombified” state of stupefied unresponsiveness and which Brodber seems to suggest is synonymous with the apathy and despair induced by a world “fraught with the widespread devastation of colonialism” (Cornell, 2010, 95). Ella’s condition therefore demands from the spiritual healer and medicine man a metaphysical preparation, invoking the forces of nature since her malady, a convergence of negative forces requires a convergence of positive forces as a counteractive strategy borne from Mas Cyrus’s communion with the natural world. His patient’s trembling body triggers an electrical storm that “infected each little body” spreading rapidly through the grove with a calamitous noise that disrupts the natural order of things. Observing this electrification, Mas Cyrus notes that, “this pain, confusion and destruction is what these new people bring to themselves and to this world” (1999, 3). His consternation is exacerbated by the destruction wrought upon the trees, the insects, and other life forms that are shaken out of

normality by the presence of Ella's inert body in his grove. Ella's disease shakes the very foundations of the grove, "under the dry trash and into the hollow of the root" (1999, 2) and it is these very foundations of earthly life that Mas Cyrus draws upon to counteract the storm of psycho-emotional trauma that engulfs his prostrate patient. Ella's healing is initiated when Mas Cyrus exorcises of the "grey mass of muck," a tangible manifestation of colonial "debris" and accumulated self-hatred.

Following this exorcism and Ella's re-stabilization, she begins her teaching career with forty seven-year-old novices in her charge. She is acutely aware that their social, spiritual, and intellectual development hinges greatly upon what and how she teaches them. Hence, she questions and critiques aspects of the colonial education system, and is encouraged by Reverend Simpson, who emboldens her to question objectionable narratives in her teaching text that thematize the ostracism and marginalization of characters (Willie and Percy) who exercise agency against the dominating presence of Farmer Joe. Ella is concerned that reading this text, her students will be "invited into complicity" and coerced to view Percy and Willie (1999. 97) and, by extension, themselves as inferior. Her realization that the story, Mr. Joe's Farm, is an allegory of zombification, an experience with which she is intimately acquainted, impels her to arm her charges with critical literacy to bolster them against too ready an acquiescence and unquestioned acceptance of all that they imbibe.

While Simpson responds to Ella's critique with outward impatience, his method of response urges her to articulate her indignation regarding Percy and Willie's exclusion from the community of Mr. Joe's farm. This probing propels Ella toward an engagement with core philosophical questions of being and of ontology. How does the ostracism of Percy and Willie

and their exclusion from community diminish their ontology? How does their thwarted attempt to assert their agency diminish their own sense of self? At the heart of Ella's contemplations is the core philosophical question of *being-ness*. Reverend Simpson's Myal counterpart, Dan, eagerly informs the cohort of her spiritual and intellectual progress, declaring, "Percy, Willie, she is thinking. Did you hear her? [...] There is hope. There is hope. Willie, my job can be done" (1999, 98). With a sense of exhilaration, Dan acknowledges the turning point in Ella's social, intellectual and psychic transformation: "Has she not seen two things in one?" He exclaims to Willie and Percy. "The two first principles of spirit thievery—let them feel that there is nowhere for them to grow to. Stunt them. Percy and Master Willie are stunted. Let them see their brightest ones as the dumbest ever" (1999, 98).

Willie and Percy, the sage and spiritual healer, and principal agents of Ella's emerging consciousness, circumnavigate the colonial *othering* of African-centered cosmogony by encouraging Ella's critical inquiry and her attempt to articulate a paradigm of humanness that is rooted in an African communitarian ethos, one that sees community "as a locus of individual existence...without which... identity [is] impossible to frame (Chachine, 2008, 26). Ella's paradigm of personhood invokes the African concept of *Ubuntu*, which defines personhood as being inextricably bound to the notion of affiliation and belonging. According to Isaias Ezequiel Chachine,

In the African social system, 'to be' is to belong; an individual exists because of others. Therefore, the idea of community occupies center stage in the African understanding of person; the very notion of a person's identity is defined in terms of a person's relationship to community (2008, 39).

The characters Willie and Percy in Ella's colonial reader and the parallel characters in Brodber's text negate the authority of colonial power, and are alienated because of it; yet this very alienation is the source of their resilience. Their forging of an alternative sense of community is fundamental to their self-definition and attainment of freedom. Dan earlier asks Willie, "What's this with you being in the wilderness and not learning their ways...And Perce? Why is he stuck in some grove talking to snails and me alone in this Egypt?" (1999, 67). Willie admonishes Dan to enact a strategy "to beat back those spirit thieves and make our way back home" (1999, 67). The central message of Brodber's text – resistance to dehumanization, the recuperation of the Afro-Caribbean self, the need to retrieve and reclaim a spiritual inheritance that represents "the latent and untold dimension of the self enunciated by Ole African: 'the half has never been told' – is here amplified.

The Myal group is critical to understanding the novel's discourse on Afro-Caribbean subjectivity, and the ways in which individual subjectivity is anchored within a communal context to a sense of belonging. If, as Isaias Ezequiel Chachine posits, community is the place where "moral values, beliefs and the very source of moral agency...are formed and nurtured" (Chachine, 2008, 39), the role of the Grove Town community is essential to shaping its citizens and to maintaining social cohesion. The Myal cohort's spiritual guardianship of the Grove Town community offers protection against the interpenetration of malevolent forces that threaten it with disunity and destabilization.

By invoking the "hegemony of the spirit" or by "defining the domain of spirit and authorizing [its] epistemic claim" (Henry, 2000, 251) in Afro-Caribbean life, Brodber redresses, at least in part, the historical schism in Afro-Caribbean philosophy that, as Henry observes, "has

been marked by a number of internal splits, dualities and oppositional constructions” (2000, 248) and by an “overidentification with Europe and the underidentification with Africa” (2000, 248). The secular tradition that emerged following Afro-Caribbean philosophy’s break with its Afro-Christian past has greatly influenced by the de-emphasis on spirituality and the jettisoning of metaphysics in Euro-philosophical discourse, which influenced the formative stages and evolution of Afro-Caribbean intellectual thought. Brodber’s paradigm insists not only upon the re-integration of the spiritual as integral to Afro-Caribbean identity, but also upon its reinstatement at the epicenter of this identitarian matrix, and as the central ethics of communitarian existence.

In heralding the spiritualist dimension in both philosophical and literary discourse, Brodber’s work asserts a reinvigorated critical consciousness that advocates a new humanism. or, as June Roberts has observed, “advocates a new age of politicized aesthetics where change occurs quietly, not cataclysmically, individually and internally...not violently, but spiritually” (2006, 189).²⁷ The spiritual, phenomenological approach Brodber engages in her fictional strategy facilitates a more in-depth probing of Afro-Caribbean selfhood and in fact presents an alternative philosophy of fictional composition that invites a reformulation of our understanding of historical time and the constituents of subjectification.

My reading of Brodber’s fiction within the frame of Africana philosophy serves as much to illuminate the synergies as to point up the divergences between academic Africana philosophy and what Anthony Bogues refers to as the “redemptive prophetic” stream in the Black radical

²⁷ Roberts, June. *Reading Erna Brodber: Uniting the Black Diaspora through Folk Culture and Religion*. Praeger: Westport CT, 2006. Roberts reads Brodber’s fiction as insisting upon spiritual re-connection as the only path to self-acceptance, a “remaking of the inner world.”

tradition, of which I would posit, Brodber is an important proponent. Such approaches, Bogue contends, are antithetical to those of Western educated intellectuals, and are “rooted in the subsoil of the African diaspora” (2003, 16). Hence, the paradigmatic models of reasoning that emanate from this ground stand in sharp epistemological contrast (Bogue, 2003, 16) to received Western models. Moreover, Brodber’s dialectic, presented in literary and allegorical form, contests conventional definitions and explanations provided by some scholars regarding the practice and function of Myal as a religious form, its derivation, provenance, and core historical and contemporary function in the life of Afro-Caribbean peoples. Brodber’s thematization of the realities of Caribbean post-slavery colonial existence, along with a clear focus on Afro-spirituality illuminate the novel’s philosophical resonances, and make the argument for a reconfigured definition of the human within the frame of a new (Afro-Caribbean) humanist paradigm.

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